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AUTHOR Bergeron, Bette S.; Rudenga, Elizabeth A.
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ABSTRACT

A study, considering the needs of both classroom teachers and university-based instructors, examined how teachers delineated thematic instruction and translated that conception into practice. A total of 20 teachers, representing 17 classrooms, were observed as they implemented thematic instruction. Team-teaching was observed in two classrooms with student teachers and within a kindergarten program involving a language development specialist. The primary data source was guided interviews conducted individually with each teacher participant after the thematic unit had been completed. Ongoing analysis of the interview transcripts indicated: (1) teachers perceived there was an underlying core to the themes they implemented; (2) teachers described the activities generated from the theme core to be personal, active, integrative and purposeful; (3) teachers reported that barriers such as time constraints, curriculum demands, traditional thinking, and uncertainty obstructed and hampered their implementation of thematic instruction. Findings suggest that research and inservice training programs should be more cognizant of the uncertainties some teachers feel when faced with making instructional change, particularly within settings where traditional thinking is prevalent. (Figures representing models of teacher participants' delineation of thematic instruction and of teacher participants' perceptions of barriers to theme implementation are included.) (RS)

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Bette S. Bergeron
Purdue University Calumet
Department of Education, X-132
Hammond, IN 46323
219-989-2883

Elizabeth A. Rudenga
Trinity Christian College

DELINEATING AND UNDEFINING THEMATIC INSTRUCTION

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Delineating and Undefining Thematic Instruction

The reported study focuses upon teachers' perceptions regarding thematic instruction, an approach that has the potential for integrating classroom content in an authentic and motivating manner. Specifically, two primary questions are addressed through this research: (1) How do teachers delineate thematic instruction and translate that conception into practice? and (2) Do teachers believe that constraining factors exist that "un-define," and therefore undermine, the implementation of thematic instruction? These questions are being considered through an in-process collaborative project involving our role as university-based researchers and 20 elementary and middle school teacher participants.

This study attempts to reach the needs of both classroom teachers and university-based educators. As answers to the primary objectives are sought, it is hoped that teachers can be supported in better understanding the process of instructional change and making program transitions within their classrooms. A more complete understanding of teachers' conceptions of change constraints should also aid in instructional transitions as potential barriers are addressed and accommodated. Similarly, a more acute understanding of teachers' perceptions regarding innovations, such as thematic instruction, should provide for university-based educators a more realistic conception of actual classroom life. This knowledge has the potential to inform

methods courses, and offer college students a more accurate conception of classroom instruction.

Methodology

The primary research thrust is in discovering participants' interpretations of instruction and change barriers within the natural context of the classroom; thus, this study can be considered as phenomenological (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; van Manen, 1990). By becoming immersed within the classroom context, we hoped to more effectively establish trust with our participants and therefore be accepted within the learning community.

This study was initiated in the summer of 1992, during which time we had noted an increased interest in thematic instruction from teachers with whom we had contact. This trend has also been reported by Kletzien (1993). In order to more fully understand this transition, potential participants were contacted and invited to volunteer in a one-year thematic project. Participants were drawn from graduate courses, former student teachers, and teacher hosts for methods field experiences. A total of 20 teachers, representing 17 classrooms, expressed an interest in the project. Team-teaching was observed in two classrooms with student teachers and within a kindergarten program involving a language development specialist. Participants varied in teaching experience, previous use of themes, gender, race, and school location. Both public and private schools were represented.

Teacher participants were asked to inform us of the topic and projected date of a theme they planned to implement during the 1992-93 school year. We were individually paired with those participants with whom we had previously established the closest rapport. Teachers had the option of limiting our involvement in the theme implementation. For example, some teachers preferred that we only observed instruction, while others encouraged direct team-teaching and collaborative planning. In addition to the classroom experiences, monthly group meetings were offered to all participants to provide professional support for the implementation process.

The primary data source for this study was guided interviews (Patton, 1990), conducted individually with each teacher participant after the thematic unit had been completed. Through this interview approach, a set of issues to be addressed was outlined in advance; the sequencing and wording of questions, however, remained flexible in accordance to both our needs and those of the participants. Each transcript was independently analyzed by both researchers. During analysis we sought emerging trends regarding teachers' delineation and undefining of thematic instruction. Analyses were then compared, and a list of common threads across transcripts was generated. This list was used, and modified, through the process of constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The interview data were compared with additional research instruments, including informal conversational interviews

(Patton, 1990), researcher as participant observer (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984), fieldnotes, and artifacts that include children's work completed during themes. These data were used to gain further information regarding the participants' interpretation and perceptions of themes.

Results and Conclusions

Delineating Thematic Instruction

Ongoing analysis of the interview transcripts revealed common trends regarding teacher participants' interpretation of thematic instruction. One common category that emerged from the data indicated that teachers perceive there is an underlying *core* to the themes they implement, illustrated by a central circle on Figure 1. The core, or "skeleton," includes building upon a curricular concept to develop theme activities. This "seed idea" provides the common thread from which skills are presented, and an "avenue" for covering curricular content.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Theme cores, particularly at the primary level, focused on concrete topics drawn from science and social studies that included colors, stars, seasons, and Native Americans. Middle grade themes were often initiated from a curricular unit such as short stories or poetry. While each theme core was directly linked to curricular requirements, it could be suggested that the concrete nature of the topics in this study limited the

development of the themes. Conceptual topics, such as pioneering or bravery, may have allowed for greater growth within the learning experience.

Teachers described the activities generated from the theme core to be *personal, active, integrative,* and *purposeful*. The *personal* component relates to teachers' perception that themes are "fun" for both them and their students, and that the classes become personally "involved" with their lessons. Involvement arose, in part, through student input regarding topics and activities. The personal element emerged as the most common perception of thematic instruction.

Teachers also perceived that within thematic learning *active* involvement is provided through "concrete," "hands-on" experiences that *integrated* content areas of the curriculum through the common core. Curricular "connections" were made as theme lessons were presented. Lastly, teachers perceived that themes were *purposeful* because they provided experiences meaningful to students. The "carry-over" into students' lives was considered by teacher participants as a positive outgrowth of thematic instruction.

When considering the thematic model as presented in Figure 1, it is useful to note the interplay between the core and its elements. Without the instructional elements, the core is complete but unvaried and without instructional nuances that may make learning more motivating for students. Without the core, however, the instructional elements remain unrelated and

unfocused, without providing the content of learning. As delineated by the teacher participants, a successful theme requires both the core and appropriate instruction.

Undefining Thematic Instruction

Teacher participants perceived that certain factors exist that seem to "un-define," and therefore undermine, thematic instruction (see Figure 2). Teachers report that barriers such as *time* constraints, *curriculum* demands, *traditional thinking*, and *uncertainty* obstruct and hamper their implementation of thematic instruction. Some barriers are perceived as so restrictive that they block the attempts of teachers to begin to implement themes. These constraints are illustrated in Figure 2 through shaded boxes. The dotted lines around the boxes indicate that the barriers are not insurmountable, however, and that it is possible to overcome or navigate around them. Similar barriers appear once again when teachers are in the process of designing purposeful and integrated units of instruction. When accommodations are made, transitions towards thematic instruction can proceed.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Teachers relate that *time* required to plan and prepare materials is a large and reoccurring barrier. Time, in a different function, also includes the component of scheduling. This corresponds to the predicament that teachers have in

discovering blocks of uninterrupted instructional time (Allington & Guice, 1993). In addition, the need to cover a certain amount of *curriculum*, to use the textbooks and workbooks provided, and to implement a new series or other curricular unit was perceived by teachers as obstructing their use of thematic instruction. As one participant noted, "there's always going to be somebody breathing down your throat to use the textbooks... whether it be your principal or just the state requirements." A similar driving force was reported Lapp, Flood, and Moore (1993) by teachers who integrated literature, language arts, and science. *Traditional thinking* by the administration and other teachers also hinders implementation, when participants perceive that support is not given to change. This feeling of *uncertainty* and lack of support seems to postpone or impede the development of thematic instruction. As reported by Allington and Guice (1993), effective support allows teachers to more easily make transitions within the classroom.

Future Implications

Because it has gained increased grassroots appeal, thematic instruction provides a potentially important avenue for exploration and an appropriate focus of study. By seeking to understand constraints to curricular transitions that include thematic instruction, teachers can be better supported in making changes within their programs.

The information generated from this study also has the potential to support educators in becoming more aware of

classroom teachers' perspectives regarding program innovations such as thematic instruction. In doing so, research and inservice training can be more accurately informed. Those coordinating staff development programs, for example, can become more cognizant of the uncertainties some teachers may feel when faced with making instructional change, particularly within settings where traditional thinking is prevalent. A focus can be placed on collaborating with supportive peers to develop curricular cores from which active, integrative, and purposeful lessons can be developed.

Because teachers in our study reported an uncertainty in initiating and scheduling time for preparing themes, the planning process can be outlined and brainstormed during an inservice. Knowing that teachers have to "cover" required content, existing curriculum guides can be used when modeling the planning process. To provide a concrete glimpse into classrooms where themes are implemented, examples of student work, instructional materials, and photographs can be displayed. Additionally, we have recognized the need for administrators to understand the process of change and to provide staff support; therefore, it can be useful to encourage building principals to attend and fully participate within inservice programs.

Consideration can also be taken as university-based educators prepare methods courses that reflect the realities of practice and that encourage preservice teachers to develop theme resources for use within future classrooms. Course assignments,

for example, can guide students in developing and presenting themes related to an anticipated core topic. Collaborative grouping can be encouraged to provide students with peer support within the planning process. Perhaps most importantly, students need time to talk with and observe teachers who are in a variety of stages of theme implementation so that both the delineations and barriers of transition can be openly shared.

Throughout this study, we have noted additional considerations that will provide focus for further exploration. For example, questions emerged regarding teachers' pedagogical philosophy, and resulting consequences when conflicts arise between colleagues with differing philosophies. Also of interest is the continuity between teachers' definitions of thematic instruction and actual practice. The role of student choice and input within the theme implementation arose as a possible topic of inquiry. How teachers conceptualize future changes within their thematic programs, break through barriers, and make decisions relating to the planning itself, emerged as additional questions to pursue. As comparative analysis of all data sources continues throughout the study, it is hoped that insight will be gained into participants' interpretations of these questions.

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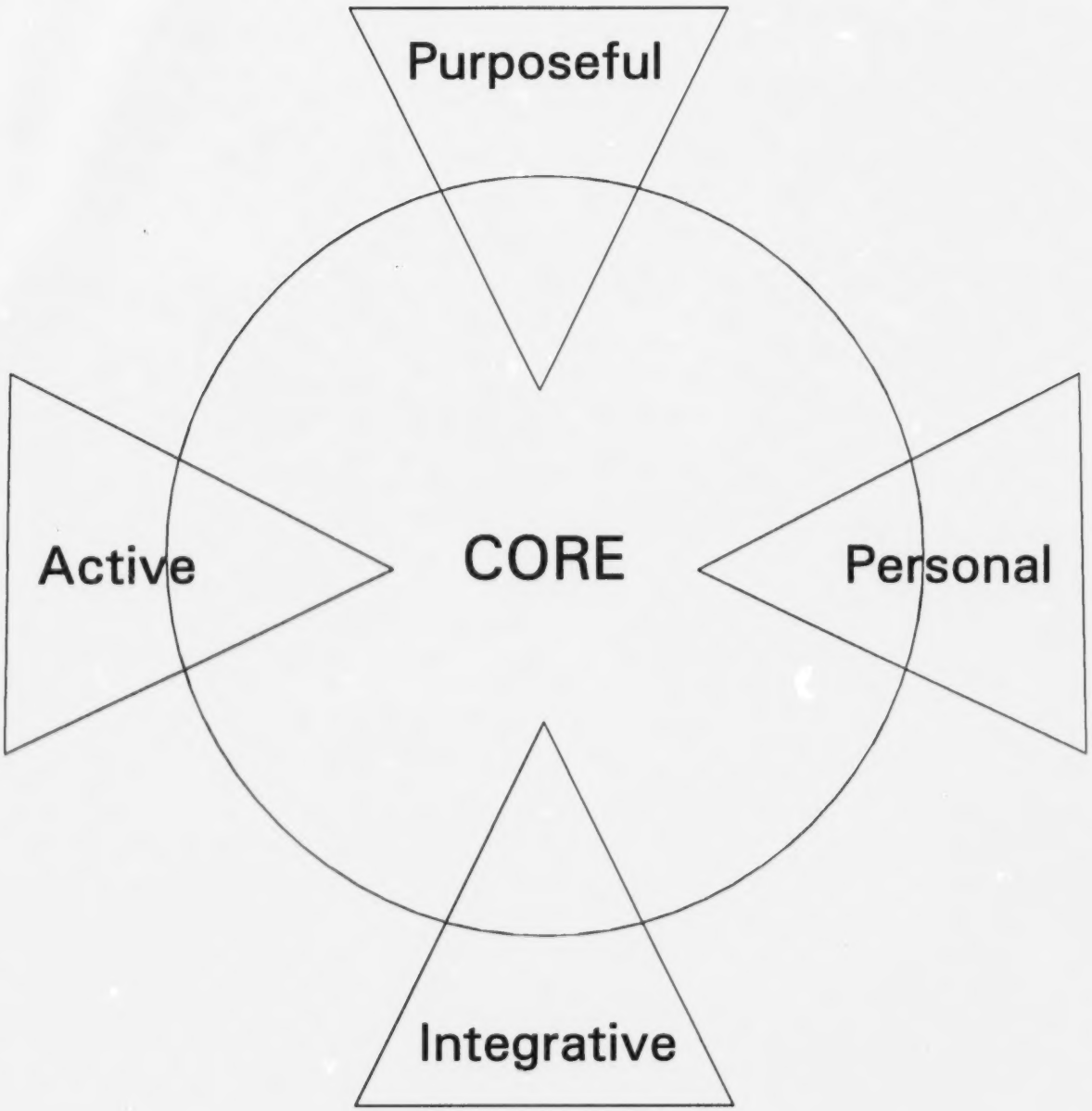
Figure Captions

Figure 1. Model of teacher participants' delineation of thematic instruction.

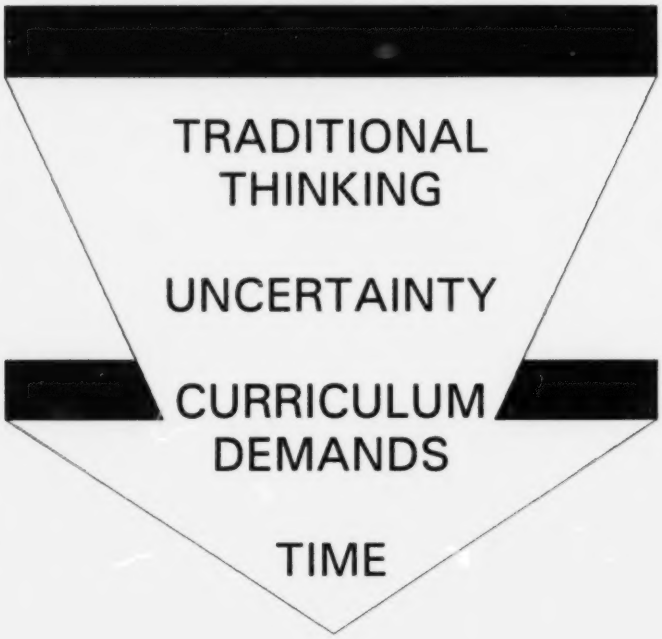
Figure 2. Model of teacher participants' perceptions of barriers to theme implementation.



Theme Delineation: Components

BARRIERS

UNCERTAINTY	TIME
TRADITIONAL THINKING	CURRICULUM DEMANDS



THEMATIC INSTRUCTION